DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 094 527 EC 062 472

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TITLE Parents' Role.
INSTITUTION Boston Center for Blind Children, Mass.
PUB DATE 24 May 74
NOTE 4p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Blind; *Exceptional Child Education; *Multiply Handicapped; *Parent Counseling; *Parent Role; Program Descriptions; Visually Handicapped
IDENTIFIERS Boston Center for Blind Children

ABSTRACT

A psychologist discusses efforts at the Boston Center for Blind Children to help parents adjust to the demands of their multiply-handicapped, visually-impaired children. The following programs are found to be helpful: an infant home visiting program (see EC 062 470)in which parents develop their role through participating in an individualized teaching program; a preschool program (see EC 062 471) through which school activities are coordinated with parenting activities at home; and periodic meetings of parents and staff of both the infant and preschool programs during which information and attitudes on common problems are exchanged. (GW)

ED 094527

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PARENTS' ROLE

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EC062472

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By nature, the human infant requires parenting of some sort for survival. During the first months and years, the child is helpless and must have someone (a parent or parent figure) to provide for him. Thus, those of us who have survived have been "parented" and from this experience we may well have developed some of our ideas of what being a parent means. Further, we may have, through this experience as well as later observation, decided what are desirable and undesirable characteristics in a parent. Almost everyone, then, has some notion of the parent role. This role idea may be modified through actually having to perform as a parent. Fulfilling the requirements of the parent role can be difficult with children who have no handicapping condition. But for parents of children with one or more major handicaps, the requirements of the role can seem staggering. Following the initial impact of discovering the handicapping condition, parents immediately find themselves thrust into a role with new and unknown requirements: the role of parent to a handicapped child. Much of the time this is a brand new state for which most are ill prepared on the basis of past experiences. There are many questions: What is the nature of my child's disorder? What can be done to treat it? What can be done to cope with what cannot be treated immediately? What effect will it have on our life style? What will others say or think? What about the other children in the family? Where is help available? What hope is there? Are we isolated with this problem? Who has the answers?

PARENTS' ROLE (Cont'd)

Even after the initial impact of having a multi-handicapped child has subsided and an adjustment made, parents are seldom satisfied with their fulfillment of this special parent role.

Our program at Boston Center for Blind Children has as one of its more important objectives to create a situation that allows for maximum growth and satisfaction of both parent and child. In the infant program (home visiting) there is a definite plan to aid the parents (especially the mothers) in developing their role through participation in the individualized teaching program. Mother's cooperation is essential (and she usually welcomes the opportunity) since one hour a week of a professional's work with the child can scarcely be expected to yield substantial results. Very often mothers are relieved to have a plan of action, finding that they can do something meaningful.

In the preschool program, although the child spends a greater amount of time under professional care at the Center, individual school activities for a specific child are coordinated with home activities which of necessity involve the parent.

Another source of new ideas about parent role is the periodic meetings of parents and staff of both infant and preschool programs. Fathers, by nature of their occupational requirements, are often less involved with the child's activity program than mothers. Needless to say, a positive attitude on the father's part toward the joint effort of mother and staff is most desirable. Fathers do participate in parent meetings and also have the opportunity

PARENTS' ROLE (Cont'd)

to realize that parents can do something to help the handicapped child; that professionals are not the sole source of help. Perhaps one of the more valuable aspects of the parent meetings is the exchange of information and attitudes around common problems. This exchange can be through conversation with staff, other parents, an expert in the field, or through the audio-visual medium. Parents can hear how others cope with problems they all share to some degree or other.

The Center staff is fully appreciative of the individual nature of the children and the parents with whom they work. Thus, there is no effort to ask parents to conform to an "ideal", and there is no notion that all multi-impaired children are alike. While parents of handicapped children and handicapped children themselves may have common characteristics, they may also differ considerably in various ways. These differences are taken into account in our program. As the assets and strengths of the participants become known, staff workers help to mobilize them.

The development of the parental role, then, is viewed as a process. It takes time and effort on the part of parent, staff, and child to establish and understand a framework for working together. Our goal is to create a situation that realistically makes the most of what each participant has to give. When we move in this direction, the result is customarily a greater sense of fulfillment.